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Safe water provides opportunities otherwise unavailable

by Rep. Todd Tiahrt, 4th Congressional District of Kansas

Water. It is the building block of life. We are made of it, and we cannot live without it. We look to it for everything from transporting cargo across the ocean to scrubbing dirt off our hands. It is in the air we breathe and in the soil on which we walk. We drink it, we swim in it and we shield ourselves from it during a thunderstorm. Water sustains us. Alternatively, water can bring destruction, cause economic ruin and spread disease. Poorly managed water resources and infrastructures have been the cause of public outcry and can have serious consequences.

Knowing what water can do for us and to us, I am grateful to the professionals in Kansas who dedicate themselves to making our drinking water safe and our water systems efficient. Not only do we have safe drinking water, but we also have the best tasting water in the country. In April of this year, the Public Wholesale Water Supply District No. 4 of Cherryvale, Kansas, won the National Rural Water Association's Great American Water Taste Test. I was thrilled to learn that this award had gone to Kansas, and more specifically, to a supplier in my district.

Our communities here in America have come to depend on a constant source of safe drinking water and reliable waste management. However, it has only been within the past several decades that we standardized easily-accessible, clean water for nearly every household in America. Sixty years ago nearly half of all American households lacked indoor plumbing. According to the latest census, just over one half of one percent of all houses lacked indoor plumbing in 2000; and many of these houses are in rocky or remote places. That is a remarkable accomplishment most of us do not really think about. Those involved in making water publicly accessible and safe should take great pride in knowing America is a better place to live because of their dedication. Technological innovations and commitment to the basic principles of sustaining the "public health, welfare and safety" of our communities have created enormous opportunities otherwise not available.

Supplying rural America with access to quality water service has transformed rural life and made convenience and safety commonplace. I enjoy rural water service at my home in Goddard. Rarely have I experienced any problems or degraded service, and routine maintenance has usually been brief.

As representative to the United States House of Representatives for south-central Kansas, local water issues unique to our region are important to me. One of the larger water projects in my district I have been involved with is the recharge and preservation of the Equus Beds. This crucial water source supplies water to 500,000 people in south-central Kansas and is thought to be the best option available for the long-term water needs of the greater Wichita area. Over the past few years, I have been able to secure federal dollars to defray costs related to the pilot recharge project. Wichita has been eager to move forward with the full-scale recharge plan. One of the current issues facing the City and other proponents of recharging the Equus Beds is how to secure a safe water supply while balancing the needs of landowners and agriculture producers who have voiced strong opposition to the project.

As important as the Equus Beds recharge project is to south-central Kansas, improving the water quality in the Arkansas River is another important task faced by local officials and one that I have obtained federal funds to help address. In the FY2001 Appropriations bill, I was able to secure \$2.3 million to help the City of Wichita clean up the Arkansas River.

I obtained \$2 million for wastewater infrastructure improvements to help clean up Wichita's leaking sewer mains and aging septic tanks that were contributing to the river's pollution problems. The

remaining \$300,000 I secured was to help the City fund further investigations into pollution causes of the Arkansas River. These funds are helping Wichita officials identify causative factors, secure recommendations for remediation, work with regulators and other key figures and educate the public. The project is just now entering phase II, which will evaluate management practices for remediation and continue to refine and calibrate statistical and dynamic models. It will conclude by reporting findings and making recommendations for how the City of Wichita should proceed in cleaning up the Arkansas River.

In addition to water quality issues, security of our nation's water systems has also been the focus of much attention. The nation's water supply and infrastructure have long been recognized as being vulnerable targets for vandalism or terrorism, but there has been renewed attention to our susceptibility ever since the 2001 terrorist attacks. The federal government has acknowledged that it has a responsibility to protect many structures, but it has also recognized the vast majority of the nation's water infrastructure is privately or locally owned and operated. Public/private and local/federal partnerships for security implementation will be a focus of discussion over the next several months and years. Approximately 15 percent of the nation's drinking and wastewater utilities provide service to more than 75 percent of the United States population. While it would seem a strike on these larger concentrated water systems would be the first choice of terrorists, some have cautioned that the smaller systems may be more attractive targets because they tend to be less protected. If any of these systems are disrupted, one can only image the havoc a loss of water flow for firefighting efforts could produce. Chemical or biological infiltration could also pose a threat to the public, although many experts believe it would be difficult to introduce sufficient quantities to cause widespread harm.

Regardless of the size of threat or magnitude of destruction to a potential target, all water system operations need to be continuously evaluated for susceptibility to attacks. As the Department of Homeland Security continues to organize itself, I will be supportive of measures that will help states and local utility systems receive assistance for security upgrades. Money spent on deterrence is far less costly than money spent on recovery. As we debate policy and search for new ways to protect our water systems and structures, we must keep in mind the unifying goal: to provide quality water systems and services to the public for the sustained health and well-being of our communities. After all, water is what sustains us.

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